

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. Bulletin
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbjm19

Middle Eastern studies today

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Published online: 24 Feb 2007.

To cite this article: Albert Hourani (1984) Middle Eastern studies today, British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. Bulletin, 11:2, 111-120, DOI: 10.1080/13530198408705393

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13530198408705393

MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES TODAY[1]

Albert Hourani

What follows is a slightly revised version of a talk given at the Eleventh Annual Conference held at St Antony's College, Oxford, 8-11 July 1984. The author retains the copyright.

I have called my talk 'Middle Eastern studies to-day', but perhaps I may be excused for talking more about yesterday and the day before yesterday. I had intended to speak about the official inquiry into the present situation of Asian and African studies which, a year or two ago, we thought we were going to have, but which it now seems less likely that we shall have, and to ask what we might have expected or feared or hoped to see in its report, and this led me to think about earlier reports.

Two of them will be familiar to the older generation: the Scarbrough Report written by an inter-departmental committee on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African studies set up by the Foreign Office and published in 1947,[2] and the Hayter Report, produced by a sub-committee of the University Grants Committee appointed to inquire into the same fields of study and published in 1961.[3] Both these reports have played a part in my life: I was appointed to my teaching post under the scheme of expansion recommended by the Scarbrough Report, and the development of Middle Eastern studies in Oxford, as elsewhere in the country, was made possible by the Hayter Report. So I began to think about them, but they led me further back, to the first important report on the organization of oriental studies in this country, written by a committee set up by the government of the time in response to a delegation from the Senate of the University of London. This was published in 1909, and is known as the Reay Report from the name of the chairman of the committee.[4]

I have just read all three reports, and what has struck me has been that they are very different from each other in some ways, and very similar in others. The starting-point of each of them is different and reflects the needs and spirit of the age in which it was written, but the responses to those needs are much the same.

When we read the Reay Report, we are at once plunged into the certainties and doubts of the imperial age. The basic need to which it tries to respond is that of providing for the preliminary training of persons who are going out to the East or to Africa, either for the public service or private business,[5] or for medical or missionary work. This training is regarded as being even more important than in the past. 'The foreigner has brought with him and introduced into the East the surroundings of the West'; there is a need to penetrate behind the screen of those who speak English to the heart of society, and this is more difficult because there is 'less knowledge and contact than there used to be'. It is all the more important because there has been a certain awakening of the peoples of the East. They look at their rulers with new eyes

and greater sensitivity; there is a need for 'some familiarity with social manners, and with the peculiar notions and prejudices of Oriental peoples', so as not to make 'an unintentional breach of etiquette or offence against some religious prejudice'.[6] Beneath the assurance there is a certain uneasiness, because of competition from other European powers. The French, Russians and Germans -- and in particular the Germans -- seem to be better trained in languages and in knowledge of social manners and cultures, and to be more successful in business.

In other words, the first concern is with imperial rule and trade. There is little sense, in the Reay Report, of any interchange of cultures; of any idea that by studying Arabic or Chinese and the cultures connected with it one can do more than acquire a useful skill and can enrich oneself. There is even a certain contempt implied in such phrases as those about 'the peculiar notions and prejudices of Oriental peoples'.

When we come to the Scarbrough Report, the age of empire is, in fact, ending; the British withdrawal from India took place in the year in which the report was published. A different world was coming to birth -- one in which Britain would have to accept that decisions affecting half the world would no longer be made in London and Paris; what had been questions of colonial rule were becoming questions of international diplomacy, but if that diplomacy were carried on with knowledge, skill and sensitivity, Britain could still have a position of influence. We are in the age of Attlee and Bevin, of the last great attempt to create a kind of moral empire to replace that which was ending. Thus the point from which the report starts is that 'cooperation between nations is the basis of world-peace and future prosperity'; 'a nation which does not possess a sound foundation of scholarship is ill-equipped to deal with world-affairs'.[7] Once more, the British have fallen behind because of insularity; 'we cannot go on ignoring the manners and customs of the greater part of the world's population'.[8]

The Hayter Report came out not very long after the Scarbrough Report -- fifteen years only -- but it was aware that things had changed. There was now a plural world, in which Europe no longer had a privileged position; 'the political centre of gravity of the world ... has now moved outwards, east, west and south'.[9] The colonial empires had dissolved into independent states, and the world was more competitive than before, but the British educational system has not kept pace with this: 'so far as it considers any area outside the United Kingdom, it still seems able only to see western Europe, with an occasional bow to North America and the Commonwealth'.[10]

The three reports express different views of the world, but they all come to the same conclusion. Whatever was needed, Britain was not doing it, and all three broadly agreed on what was needed. The published version of the Reay Report contains the

minutes of evidence given to it and the results of a questionnaire sent out to institutions in every major European capital -- Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Rome and St Petersburg -- and it is clear from these that Britain was behind other countries both in the organized study of oriental subjects and in the provision of training for practical needs. There were some small training schemes in Oxford and Cambridge, for those accepted into the Indian, Egyptian and Sudanese civil services, and into the Levant consular service. Apart from anthropology, which had been introduced into the Oxford course for Sudan probationers at the suggestion of Sir Reginald Wingate, governor-general of the Sudan, these courses were limited to the teaching of languages: Levant consular probationers at Cambridge began Arabic, Persian and Turkish on the same day, and Russian, if they wished, a term later. There was nothing similar to the schools of living oriental languages and 'colonial studies' in some other countries: the École des Langues Orientales in Paris and the Oriental Seminar in Berlin.

Academic study was limited to a few teachers at Oxford and Cambridge; at London University there were some nominal teachers, but they received only a small retaining fee and rarely had students. All the teachers were mainly concerned with language and literature and taught other subjects only in a marginal way. At Oxford, for example, in 1914 there was a professor of Arabic, an Egyptian teacher of Arabic supplied by the Egyptian government for the Civil Service probationers, and a teacher of Persian for the Indian probationers. Courses were given in Arabic, both classical and colloquial, and in Persian; apart from them, the only lectures with any kind of Islamic or Middle Eastern content were those by F.F.Urquhart, son of the famous Near Eastern traveller David Urquhart, on 'The Eastern Question', and those by Sir Ernest Trevelyan on 'Muhammedan Law', by which was presumably meant the 'Anglo-Muhammadan law' current in India. Apart from the Civil Service probationers, there were almost no students; only one person obtained the Honours B.A. in Arabic during the years 1910-14, and graduate study scarcely existed in Oxford at that time. There was no possibility of creating a real community of oriental scholars.

The situation was slightly better than the Reay Report implied. It was not concerned with scholarly activities which took place outside teaching institutions, and therefore paid little attention to the tradition of private scholarship which had been created by the long connection of the British with India from the time of Sir William Jones onwards. Persian was the language through which the East India Company administered its Indian possessions until well into the nineteenth century, and even after that a succession of officials and army officers continued to study the language and the culture connected with it, as well as other languages current in India.

The main recommendation of the Report was that there should

be established a school of oriental studies as part of the University of London: this was the seed from which the School of Oriental and African Studies grew in due course. The details need not concern us here; what is important is the principle on which the Committee thought the school should be based. It was a principle of balance. There should, first of all, be a balance between pure scholarship and practical training. There is emphasis on the importance of creating a tradition of scholarship; as the Report put it, in the language of the time:[11]

> The existence of, at any rate, a nucleus of disinterested Oriental scholars of the first rank, training other scholars as well as our future Indian and colonial officials, is a matter of vital importance to the Empire... The success of our administrative relations with Oriental races... must depend more and more largely on our moral influence, and our intellectual prestige.

Almost all the evidence given to the Commission pointed towards this, from officials and businessmen as well as scholars. The only sceptical note was sounded by the Professor of Chinese at Cambridge, H.A.Giles, who said that in all his years of teaching he had only had one student who was interested in the language for its own sake.[12]

There should also be a balance between the classical and the living, spoken languages. The Report pointed to new methods of teaching; it was important not only to know the structure of a language but to know how to use it in various contexts. Again, the teaching of languages should be combined with teaching the history, religion and laws of those who spoke them, and it was not enough to teach the inherited cultures, it was also important to teach sociology and anthropology. All these kinds of study should be carried on in the same university institution. Once more, the only doubt was expressed by Professor Giles: 'mere colloquial seems to be beneath the dignity of a University'.[13]

The creation of the School of Oriental Studies was a remarkable achievement, but when the Scarbrough Committee came to review the situation a generation later it did not find it very different. The study of Asia and Africa, it remarked, was not a part of general education; teaching in schools was concerned with British, European and Imperial history in diminishing proportions. There was little systematic organization of oriental studies, non-linguistic studies were neglected, there were limited facilities for research and travel, library resources were not adequate, and students were few. The London School of Oriental Studies came nearer to what was needed than any other institution, but was still inadequate. There were about a dozen teachers of Arabic, Persian, Turkish and modern Hebrew, and one or two of them were skilled historians; in the years 1930-44 only three British students took the B.A. in Arabic and Persian, but there were a number of graduate students.

Elsewhere the nucleus of a community of scholars was still

lacking. To take Oxford as an example once again, in 1939 there was a professor of Arabic -- this was Gibb's first year as professor -- who did almost all the Arabic teaching, and there was a lecturer in Persian, who taught the language mainly for Indian Civil Service probationers, but who also had to teach Urdu and Hindi. The Arabic curriculum was wider than it had been; Gibb was giving his famous lectures on Islamic history, but they were advertised only in the Oriental Studies lecture list, not in that of Modern History. The lists of other faculties contained virtually no offerings in Middle Eastern or other oriental subjects. The number of students had scarcely grown: only two undergraduates took Honours degrees in Arabic and one in Persian between 1935 and 1939, and there was only one graduate student in 1939.

This lack of interest was a reflection of a more general lack of concern for the world outside Europe. The former Director of the School of Oriental Studies has recorded that, when the Second World War spread to the Far East, the School tried to enter into discussions with the War Office about the need to train some men in Chinese, and was told, 'educated Chinese spoke English; our liaison officers had no need to speak Chinese'.[14] Later in the war, however, this attitude changed; training courses in Asian languages were held at the School, and when the war ended, soldiers returned from the Middle East or further east with new interests and questions.

In its recommendations the Scarbrough Committee returned once more to the idea of a balance. Although the members of the Committee were mainly civil servants concerned with the needs of government and industry, they did not think that practical training could be effective unless it was based on a sound academic scholarship; the first need was 'the building up of an academic tradition comparable in quality and in continuity with those of the major humanities and sciences'.[15] In their view, this would involve training more teachers and creating posts for them to fill, and in this the number of students should not be the main criterion. In saying this, they stated a principle which always needs to be defended.

Thus far the Scarbrough Report was reiterating what the Reay Report had said, but it added two new elements of its own. One of them was its emphasis on the need for closer contact with the countries which were being studied, not only by means of individual travel, but also through the creation of British institutes or schools like those which already existed in Rome and Athens, or the French Institute of Arabic Studies in Damascus. Secondly, the Report emphasized the need for concentration of efforts. If teachers and students were scattered in small numbers over many universities, it would not be possible to create that 'critical mass' of specialists interacting with each other without which a continuous academic tradition could not be maintained. There should therefore be some universities where

there was a certain minimum number of teachers in departments of oriental studies, and a certain interest in these subjects in other departments sustained by teachers with special qualifications. In the Middle Eastern field it was suggested that there should be five or six such points of concentration: Oxford, Cambridge, London, a university in the north of England which could be either Manchester or Durham, and one or two in Scotland.

The plans proposed in the Scarbrough Report were intended to be carried out over a period of ten or twenty years, but in the event they came to an end after five years because of a financial crisis. Universities which had acted cautiously and with responsibility, building up their departments slowly as trained teachers became available, were badly hit. Nevertheless, within limits the plan was successful. Teachers were trained, new posts were created in half a dozen universities, and graduate studies expanded; an important development outside the universities was the establishment by the Foreign Office of the Middle East Centre of Arabic Studies, first in Jerusalem and then in Lebanon.

When the Hayter Committee came round fifteen years later, however, it found much to criticize. Once more, it thought that the necessary balance had not been achieved: between the study of languages and that of other subjects, and between classical and modern studies. Asian and African matters were not attracting many students and had little impact on the general culture or education. (There were some partial exceptions, however: what had now become the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, Durham, where private enterprise by the schools of geography and oriental studies had led to a considerable expansion, and a small beginning of regional studies at St Antony's). The Committee was particularly struck by this, because of the contrast with what it found when it visited the United States. The 1950s were the age of expansion of 'regional studies' in America: a widening of intellectual curiosity was encouraged by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and strengthened by the need of federal government for officials knowing languages and areas of strategic importance. Centres of these studies attracted large numbers of students, and students of a new kind, who had been trained in some general discipline of the mind and had come to Asian or African studies after that.

Partly because of what they had seen in the United States, the Committee made two recommendations. They repeated the suggestion of the two previous reports, that the study of history, religion, law and the social sciences should be encouraged, but went further than them in indicating how this should be done: scholars formed in these disciplines should be actively encouraged to specialize in the study of some part of Asia or Africa with a view to being appointed as teachers in their own departments, and undergraduate courses in these departments should include Asian or African elements, so as to arouse a wider

interest. It recommended also that there should be a number of 'centres' of area studies, using that word in the sense in which it was understood in the United States: that is to say, some kind of framework within which those working in different disciplines but concerned with the same region would come together and cooperate in a fruitful way.

This was an important idea. The proposition that important contributions to Middle Eastern history, for example, are most likely to be made by those who share the historical culture of the age is indeed almost self-evident. It was unfortunate, however, that the report used language which seemed to lay the blame for the defects in the British situation, as compared with the American, mainly upon departments of languages or oriental studies; they were described as 'inward-looking', lacking interest in modern studies and languages, and cut off from other departments in the universities.[16] There was no doubt some truth in this, and the Committee's conclusions were based on the evidence given to it in the universities it visited, but it went too far in its use of such expressions. It seemed to be saying that language was only a tool, not something worth studying for its own sake, and that the study of literature was less important than that of sociology. It did not state clearly enough that the fault lay also with other departments which, with some exceptions, showed little interest in encouraging their students to look beyond Western Europe and North America. The report left a certain legacy of bad blood, but nevertheless it did make possible some kinds of development.

More than twenty years have passed since the Hayter Report appeared. If there were to be another committee now, what would it find and what would it recommend? First of all, it might not find so great a contrast between this country and the United States. There seems to be some disillusionment in America with the results produced by a great input of money and effort. Many of the Centres do not work well as centres, that is to say, as places where scholars of different kinds interact with each other. The balance has not been achieved; there is too much emphasis on modern subjects, and the United States is not yet meeting its own needs in the teaching of classical subjects. The level of research and production in the social sciences varies greatly. Some centres are politicized in two different senses: the question whether or not they should accept money for research from the armed services or other government agencies is a topic of constant debate; and the political conflicts of the Middle East -- Arabs and Israelis, Turks and Armenians, Iraq and Iran -- have their echoes on the campus. Nevertheless, the achievements of the last three decades in the United States are remarkable. There has been a real breakthrough in the study of Islamic and Middle Eastern history. A comparatively large number of genuine historians have turned their minds to Middle Eastern history: that is to say, scholars with a good historical culture, a knowledge of languages, and an understanding of how to use archives, and with minds

fertilized by the social sciences. Every major American university now has at least one Middle Eastern historian; a few -- Princeton, Chicago, UCLA -- have several, Moreover, there must be something like 300 or 400 universities and colleges which give at least some kind of survey course on the Middle East, its history and contemporary problems, perhaps with a course in elementary Arabic as well.

What of the situation in this country? In some ways, the Hayter revolution has succeeded. There are now several universities where a 'critical mass' of teachers and students exists, and where teaching is spread over several departments. The three centres encouraged as a result of the Hayter Report -- the School of Oriental and African Studies, Oxford and Durham -- have expanded. Other universities have continued activities which already existed -- Cambridge and Manchester, Edinburgh and St Andrews -- and a few others have developed the teaching of Middle Eastern subjects by private initiative, in particular Exeter University and Selly Oak Colleges at Birmingham. In some of them there are groups of graduate students, but perhaps too many of them are working on modern subjects, and not enough on classical. There has been a considerable expansion in some of the social sciences: in social anthropology and human geography in particular, less in sociology, economics and political science. Much progress has been made in the teaching of languages. Serious thought has been given to it, and it is now generally agreed that languages are meant to be used and are not simply matters of theoretical study; a large number of students now attend courses in Middle Eastern countries, and the creation of a special course for British university students in Alexandria will meet a need. On the other hand, the Middle East Centre of Arabic Studies has ceased to exist, a victim of the Lebanese civil war.

One of the most important and encouraging developments has been the improvement of library facilities; this has come about not only because more money has become available for purchase of books and periodicals, but because of the close cooperation between libraries made possible by the Middle East Libraries Committee. Thanks to this organization, Middle Eastern libraries throughout the country are close to being a single library system.

There are, however, at least three gaps in the present system. First, it is still more difficult for British scholars to have frequent visits and periods of residence in the countries they study than for French or Americans. With the increase of inflation, money for leave and travel grants is more limited. British institutes of research are still more limited than French, American and German. There is still no British institution like the French Institute in Damascus or the American Research Center in Egypt. The British schools in Jerusalem, Baghdad and Ankara are mainly concerned with archaeology; the Institute in Tehran was developing on interesting lines, but its work was cut short by the revolution; there was a plan for a

British Institute in Cairo a few years ago, but nothing came of it. This is a large gap in the system; such institutions are important because they enable young scholars to spend several years of research and immersion in the society they are studying before they are drawn into full-time teaching. Secondly, interest in the Middle East has not extended far into the greater number of universities, or beyond them into training colleges or secondary schools. Such subjects are still regarded as exotic, as not being part of the national culture or the structure of higher education. There are some signs of a change, however. Britain is now a country with a plural society; the immigrant populations of the great cities will want to preserve their own traditions, and those who live and work with them will need to know something about them. Already there has been a widening of the scope of religious education in some universities and colleges. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, is the weakness in the tradition of historiography. How many Middle Eastern historians are there in the country -- that is to say, genuine historians who participate in the historical culture of the age? How many are now being trained? The number is certainly small; most graduate students come from other countries and will go back there. There are many reasons for this. It has something to do with the way in which historical study has grown here. The development of British political society is a subject of absorbing interest, which naturally stands at the very centre of historical study and teaching; there is a strong tradition created by great historians which perpetuates itself and which has the limitations of its strength. It is connected also with the way in which oriental studies have developed. Once more, there is a strong tradition of philological and literary study, and this too tends to perpetuate itself; students formed in this school tend to be distant from the historical culture which is so central in British universities.

Even if the interests of scholars changed, there would still be difficulties of another order, inherent in the organization of higher studies in this country. Let us think what is involved in training a historian of the Middle East. He should by preference have a first degree not in oriental studies but in history, so as to learn certain habits of thought and work. He would then need to acquire a much deeper knowledge of the relevant languages than is necessary for most of the social sciences; this requires a long period of graduate training -- far beyond the three years for which graduate studentships are normally given. He should have an extended period of residence in the Middle East, preferably within the framework of an institution which would enable him to work closely with indigenous scholars and to absorb the society he is studying through all his senses.

Mutatis mutandis, all this is true of those who follow other disciplines. Once the need is stated, however, it becomes clear that it is extremely unlikely that it will be met, given the present financial climate and the preoccupations of those

concerned with higher education. Even the teaching of languages is not assured, and that is grave, for at the basis of all our work must be the careful teaching of languages and study of texts written in them, the transmission of a tradition of high culture. The teaching of Arabic seems assured. There are now more then thirty university teachers of Arabic, and the interests involved in their work are such as to make it likely that it will continue at least on the same scale. The same is true of modern Hebrew, on a smaller scale. Turkish and Persian, however, are more gravely threatened: Ottoman Turkish, the great imperial language of eastern Europe and half the Mediterranean world for many centuries, and Persian, the main language of later Islamic culture, as well as of courts and governments from Asia Minor to northern India. The transmission of knowledge of them depends on a very small number of teachers; the retirement or death of one can bring nearer the threat that a scholarly tradition will be extinguished. It is thoughts such as these which raise the question, whether the strong, stable and self-perpetuating tradition which all three committees hoped for has yet been achieved.

NOTES

1. Some parts of this talk have been used in another context in 'Wednesday afternoons remembered', a paper contributed to a volume in honour of Jamal Mohammed Ahmed to be published by the University of Khartoum Press.
2. *Report of the Committee appointed by the Lords Commissioners of HM Treasury to consider the Organization of Oriental Studies in London*. Cmd. 4560, 1909 (= Reay Report).
3. Foreign Office, *Report of the Interdepartmental Commission of Enquiry on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies* (London, 1947) (= Scarbrough Report).
4. University Grants Committee, *Report of the Sub-Committee on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies* (London, 1961) (= Hayter Report).
5. Reay, p.3.
6. Ibid., p.18.
7. Scarbrough, p.24.
8. Ibid., p.25.
9. Hayter, p.41.
10. Ibid.
11. Reay, p.16.
12. Ibid., p.142.
13. Ibid., p.143.
14. C.H.Phillips, *The School of Oriental and African Studies 1917-1967: an Introduction* (London, n.d.), p.56.
15. Scarbrough, p.28.
16. Hayter, p.46.